

THE ACTOR'S REFUGE

A new conversation about actor training

Concept by

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Mission Statement:

The Actor's Refuge strives to be an open forum for the active investigation of the acting process one small group at a time.

THE PREMISE

Nothing prepares the actor for their vocation like childhood. If we turn back the clock and examine those games we played as children, we would see the purest examples of acting. In fact, for many actors this is where the acting bug bit – on the playground playing pretend.

But then acting went from joyful hobby and turned into a profession, which in turn, morphed into a business -- hours of study in a studio or university, classes, headshots, workshops. And with all of that training we have actually stopped investigating what it means to act. We've stopped questioning the most basic tenets and just accepted whatever training as set in stone...as the one true way.

One could argue that Stanislavski ushered in the last seismic shift in acting theory and that was over a hundred years ago. Since then, most actor training and most acting theory springs from him and is now codified in different ways via other teachers: i.e. Strasburg, Meisner, Clurman, Stella Adler.

Harold Clurman wrote of Stanislavski, "The System is not nor was it ever intended to be a static body of knowledge. It kept changing not only through the practice of the epigones, but with Stanislavski himself. He was always enriching it with new insights based on his experience as an actor or director." If what Clurman said is true about Stanislavski, why then does it feel like actor training is stuck in an outdated mode?

Somewhere along the way, the teaching of acting became more result oriented rather than more process oriented. That idea goes contrary to the heart of Stanislavski's experimentation, and therein lies the problem.

We've stopped taking chances. Men and women have written volumes of words devoted to the art of acting with the main result being the death of instincts.

Somewhere along the way, we have lost our innocence.
Somewhere along the way, we have denied ourselves permission to play.

THE CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS

One problem that exists is this notion that somehow there are right and wrong answers when it comes to scene or text work. And in many cases, the answers are only available via "the teacher" who later turns into "the guru."

It used to be that actors joined traveling repertory companies and would apprentice for a veteran member of that company. At a certain point they would take over the types of roles that they had trained for and would become the crafty veteran themselves, thus, taking on the next apprentice to train.

With the advent of university acting programs and acting studios and the near collapse of theatre as a viable career option, that old model of apprenticeships is affectively obsolete.

Most acting studios (and most universities, for that matter) are now set up with students on one side and at the head of a long table...the teacher.

The scenario goes something like this.

Two people are assigned a scene. They don't know each other well, so they kind of meander around the scene and offer gentle suggestions to each other as they "rehearse." They bring the scene to class and it falls flat. The teacher gives notes and then directs the scene. In a traditional play rehearsal, the director gives their point of view -- their vision -- BEFORE the first table read. The actor does their text work based on that premise and through the rehearsal process that director's vision is finely tuned and realized in front of an audience. In the studio model, the acting teacher has put the cart before the horse as it were.

And in doing so the teacher creates a dependence on themselves for the answers. They hold the key to OBJECTIVE TRUTH, which is a lie told to keep the student in perpetual dependence.

The thing that I'm discovering as I become more entrenched in the casting world is that everything is SUBJECTIVE – from the choice of who to bring in to the ultimate selection by producers. That also means that the interpretation of text is also subjective. If you give an actor a scene and have them do it for 10 different people, they will receive 10 different suggestions regarding their choices.

Unfortunately, nine out of ten times the actor will focus on the result of the audition rather than focusing on unlocking the character that exists on the page.

The following proposal outlines a new kind of acting class, one that will strive to give the discovery of the actor's unique process back to the actor.

Let me say upfront that I am not suggesting that I have the answers to the issue of actor training. I certainly have opinions but I think it's deeply important to engage in a dialogue with a small group of actors in a classroom setting.

My hope is to find a small group of highly trained actors and engage in an in-depth exploration of acting process; to take the theoretical and see if it can be realized in a practical common sense way.

CLASSROOM STRUCTURE

- 1) Class Size – No more than nine students with an even ratio of women to men.
- 2) Potential curriculum – Portions of the following texts on acting
 - A. The End of Acting by Richard Hornby will be the principal text that we'll discuss
 - B. Other texts that we might base discussion on: "Practical Handbook for the Actor" by Melissa Bruder, Lee Michael Cohn, et al; "True and False" by David Mamet; "On Acting" by Sanford Meisner
 - C. A selection of plays from across several eras of theatre and television/film scripts and sides to be distributed and studied on an ongoing basis.

Everyone involved must understand that for the first two weeks, most of the time will be spent in study of acting texts and in an open discussion regarding process and methodology.

It's crucial to create a common language and to engage the craft on an intellectual basis. After this initial stage of class work, the students will then delve into scene work.

We will also watch the clips as a class. It's important for actors to learn how to watch themselves in a way that is constructive to their process. They are asked not to JUDGE their performance, but rather, to OBSERVE what they are DOING and if that activity is communicating the character in a manner that they were going for.

SCENE STUDY

Everything in class will be done towards fully investigating and expressing character in a meaningful, dynamic way; freeing up the imagination so as to illuminate the genuine human interaction of a scene, moment to moment. It is not about preparing you for a life in the theatre.

The set up will always replicate a casting room, with an actor and a reader and then it's about drilling over and over again under various circumstances. There will be a new assignment every other week – the first two assignments will be with the full script included. All other assignments will be just the sides alone.

There will also be a "dossier" of sorts included with the sides. This will function like the director's point of view that an actor receives at the beginning of rehearsal for a play...only in a one to two page document. I have often mentioned the idea of coming into the room like a secret agent and fooling us. I believe this is an effective tool to create a fully formed and detailed persona while imbuing the process with joy.

The practice does not depend on being tied to a scene partner; where an actor doesn't get to perform if their scene partner doesn't show up for class. Everyone will perform with a reader just like in a casting session.

GOALS FOR THE CLASS

Short term:

To open up a dialogue that re-frames how we think of scene study and acting studios.

Long term:

- 1) To give actors practical tools for their work life while also helping them to re-focus on process.
- 2) To empower the student to trust their instincts.
- 3) To shift the focus away from results oriented teaching to one that is process oriented.
- 4) To destroy the preconception that artists must suffer emotionally or psychologically for their art.
- 5) To instill a pride in the art of acting by helping to give a broader understanding of the history of the craft.
- 6) To make acting joyful again.
- 7) To create an environment of honesty and security thereby allowing failure to be a welcome part of learning.
- 8) To put maximum accountability in the hands of the student.
- 9) To be more mindful of how we operate as artists and how we undermine ourselves.
- 10) To embrace the paradoxes that are inherent in the craft and the profession.

THE ACTOR'S REFUGE OPERATING AGREEMENT

- 1) There is no room for the "guru" in this space.
- 2) Feedback is question-based, solely to help the performer's process or in the character analysis. Examples of the form that the feedback will take are as follows:
"This is what I saw. Was that your intention?" or **"This is what I saw? Was that what you were going for?"**
- 3) WE ARE ON THE SAME TEAM. Candid and gentle can go hand in hand. None of us need be defensive or on high alert from attacks from the class.
- 4) Treat each assignment and session with preparation and professionalism.
- 5) We are creating a safe space where no one is afraid to go out on a limb and take risks.
- 6) This class is a place of joy and pretend, not therapy.
- 7) We all respect one another's boundaries while not limiting the potential to stretch and grow as a performer.
- 8) Be on time!! (Pause) But everyone gets a one free pass.
- 9) No romantic coupling...unless already in an established relationship.

ACTOR'S REFUGE LESSON PLAN

January 12, 2021

FIRST TWO WEEKS

- 1) Week one - **End of Acting** discussion of chapters one through five
- 2) Week two - **End of Acting** discussion of chapters six through ten and dossier explanation
 - *First assignment distributed (dossier/full script)

4 WEEKS

- 3) Week Three: First assignment with full script (play) first pass - work
- 4) Week Four: First assignment with full script (play) final pass
 - *Second assignment distributed (partial dossier/full script)
- 5) Week Five: Watch first assignment clips/discussion
 - *Second assignment – first/practice pass
- 6) Week Six: Second assignment final pass

4 WEEKS

- 7) Week Seven: Watch second assignment clips/discussion

(All subsequent assignments will be distributed via email with only a few days notice)

- 8) Week Eight: Third assignment with sides only - final pass (THERAPIST)
- 9) Week Nine: Watch third assignment clips/discussion
- 10) Week Ten: Fourth assignment with sides only - final pass (DETECTIVE)

4 WEEKS

- 11) Week Eleven: Watch fourth assignment clips/discussion
- 12) Week Twelve: Fifth assignment with sides only – final pass (MEDICAL EXAMINER)
- 13) Week Thirteen: Watch fifth assignment clips/discussion
 - Cold read assignment (in class) - 5 minute prep
- 14) Week Fourteen: Sixth assignment with sides only – final pass (LAWYER)
 - Seventh Assignment - SELF TAPE ASSIGNMENT – due before week fifteen class

4 WEEKS

- 15) Week Fifteen: Watch sixth & seventh assignments clips/discussion
- 16) Week Sixteen: Eighth assignment with sides only – COMEDY EXERCISE

17) Week Seventeen: Watch eighth assignment clips/discussion
Ninth assignment – SELF TAPE ASSIGNMENT – ANCHOR/REPORTER

18) Week Eighteen: Watch ninth assignment clips/discussion

2 WEEKS

19) Week Nineteen: Tenth assignment with sides only – CO-STAR ROLES

20) Week Twenty: Eleventh Assignment with sides only
Final thoughts/Brian gets fired by the class

Once we can gather... we break bread at Bludso's.